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THE OCTOPUS MOTIVE IN ANCIENT CHIRIQUIAN ART

By GEORGE GRANT MACCURDY

THE ancient art of the one small province of Chiriquí in the diminutive republic of Panama is perhaps better known than that of any region of like size in the New World. The material for study is abundant, consisting largely of ceramic products, both painted and unpainted. These have become more or less familiar to students of archeology through two large monographs, one by Professor W. H. Holmes¹ and the other by myself.²

It was found that the pottery could be readily divided into about a dozen rather distinct groups, depending largely on the nature of the paste and other materials used as well as the method of producing the dominant decorative features. For example, symbolism and ornament in the unpainted ware find expression in plastic forms and incised patterns. Both are traceable to zoömorphic originals, as are the plastic and painted motives in the painted ware. The motive may represent the entire animal in fairly realistic fashion or it may consist of almost any part of the animal, as for example the head, foot, tail, eye, appendage, or some characteristic body marking. Certain animal motives are always represented in the round or in relief; others appear only as incised patterns and still others predominantly as painted forms.

Thus we find the plastic armadillo dominating the great group which might appropriately bear that name; the incised serpent goes with a distinctive group of black ware; the plastic fish in the guise of tripod supports runs through another group; while the painted alligator is supreme in two closely related groups of painted ware.

One soon learns by experience to associate a given motive with a given paste, slip, quality of modeling, and the character and num-

¹ "Ancient Art of the Province of Chiriquí," *Sixth Annual Report, Bureau American Ethnology*, 1888.

² "A Study of Chiriquian Antiquities," *Memoirs Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, III, 1911.

ber of the colors employed, as well as the method of their application. After the armadillo ware, perhaps the largest group is the one to which Holmes gave the name *lost color* ware, the designs being produced by the removal of color rather than by its direct application. In addition to the process of negative painting employed, this group is also characterized by distinctive forms as well as the nature of the paste and the colors, also the degree of finish (or absence of it) to which the modeling was carried.

The lost color vessels present a wide range in point of form and size, although a large majority are globular vases or bottles of medium size. The necks being small, the interior was left in a semi-unfinished state since it was not visible. Handles, tripod supports, and motives in relief are rare. The chief merit of this class therefore lies in the painted designs. These being negative are in the color of the original ground which varies from cream to red. The interstices and the whole background for the designs are in black.

While there is a singular consistency running through the designs produced by the lost color process, for a long time they baffled interpretation, with one exception. In tracing out various motives found on the alligator ware I was able to identify one as being a conventionalized rendering of the dorsal aspect of that animal. It represents the rows of spines and scales on the back of the alligator by a number of parallel lines, the outer ones alone bearing the spine, scale, or scale-group symbols, and these only along their outer margins. This motive I also found in the lost color ware. But a majority of the designs consists of rhomboidal figures, triangles, associated bands composed of groups of straight lines, and designs in the shape of fronds and waving arms. They are found alone as well as in combination. The fronds, waving arms, triangles, and straight bars, as well as the lozenge-shaped designs are often associated with series of dots. What is the meaning of all this? At first glance they seem far removed from the motives derived from animal forms so characteristic of other groups of Chiriquian pottery. Could they be plant derivatives? Are they perhaps simply the products of uncontrolled fancy?

A key to the mystery recently came to light in the shape of a more realistic rendering of the motive than had been known hitherto. It consisted of a lozenge-shaped body to which were attached eight waving arms. It filled a circular panel on the two sides of a round-bodied lost color vase collected by Mr. George G. Heye while on a trip to Chiriquí in 1913. This vase to which Professor Marshall H. Saville had called my attention was recently published by me.¹ The design represents an octopus. At that time, I pointed out its kinship to many designs previously published by Holmes and myself, but the significance of which had not been understood.

A further study tends not only to confirm what was said in my last note but also to emphasize the importance of this newly dis-



FIG. 28.—Octopus motive. The eight appendages appear to be attached to the neck of the vase which serves as the octopus body. Yale collection. 1/3 size.

covered motive as the one distinctive feature of lost color symbolism in ancient Chiriquian art, and as another example of how a whole group of related motives in primitive art may be traced to a single zoömorphic prototype.

Recently in going over some duplicate Chiriquian pottery with a view to making an exchange, I came across several new variations

¹ "Note on the Archeology of Chiriquí," *American Anthropologist*, N.S., XV, 661-667, 1913.

of the octopus motive. In one shapely vase the eight octopus appendages are evenly distributed over the upper zone, being attached to a line just below the neck of the vessel (fig. 28). The neck and aperture thus take the place of the octopus body and mouth. The artist's point of view can perhaps be better appreciated by looking down on the vase from above rather than by a side view.

A similar idea but expressed in a different way is shown in figure 29 (fig. 167 of Holmes' monograph). Here the arms are



FIG. 29.—From Holmes. (Sixth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, fig. 167.)

attached to the equatorial zone (or slightly lower) and rise like short-based triangles to the neck of the vase. They are dotted to represent the suckers. In looking down upon this vase the arms converge toward the narrow neck of the vessel, which thus becomes the mouth opening of the octopus. The body of the vase therefore becomes the body of the octopus, which is represented not only in painted design but also in the round.

In this class likewise belongs a vase published by Holmes (fig. 181), and reproduced here in figure 30. The four triangles in the upper zone pointing toward the neck of the vessel are marked by octopus suckers. Alternating with these four triangular appendages are four groups of parallel vertical lines each group being accompanied by four frond-like octopus appendages.

Thus the octopus appendage may be represented in two ways: as a frond-like arm, or as a short-based triangle. Each type is often (but not always) accompanied by dots representing the suckers. Both types are seen in figure 31. Four of one kind alternate



FIG. 30.—From Holmes. (Sixth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, fig. 181.)

with four of the other kind converging toward the neck of a small globular vase with black ground and cream pattern. The four fronds are straight, each consisting of two lines enclosing a row of dots. Each triangular arm is set in a series of paired converging lines the outer ones being accompanied by sucker dots. An identical octopus design is repeated on the lower half of the vase, beginning midway and with the eight arms converging toward a central point on the bottom.

Another variation of this idea I discovered in the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, while there recently. The vase in question is part of an exchange collection sent from the Yale University Museum to Pittsburgh, before the author had identified the octopus motive. Four of the arms are indicated by triangles

rising from the equatorial zone to the neck. The spaces that would otherwise have been filled by the four suppressed arms are each filled by a pair of triangular arms arranged horizontally, and each accompanied by a single row of dots, an excellent example of how difficult it is to down a dominant motive once it has taken firm hold on art tradition. In order that there may be no mistaking the significance of these triangles, each is accompanied by dots paralleling one or both of the long sides but never the base of the triangle (see figs. 29, 30, 31, and 45).

In another exchange collection sent from Yale to the American Museum of Natural History, of the twenty-five vases



FIG. 31.—Two varieties of the octopus appendage motive. Four arms of each kind rise toward the neck of the vase; this design is repeated on the lower half of the vase. Heye collection, cat. no. 7461. 1/2 size.

belonging to the lost color ware about 95 per cent. are decorated with some form of the octopus motive. In one the shoulder zone is divided into five panels by means of groups of from three to five vertical lines. These groups themselves may stand for the frond-like octopus arm. Parallel to the outer lines of each group run the bases of a pair of short-based triangles, the long sides of each triangle being accompanied by dots. Were it not for the dots the design produced by the vertical lines and abutting horizontal triangles would exactly duplicate one variety of a design that I had previously named the dorsal-view motive of the alligator.

On the shoulder zone of a small vase in the Heye Museum the decorative elements are somewhat differently disposed and would

never be mistaken for a dorsal-view motive of the alligator. The two kinds of octopus arm are each repeated five times; but there are only two triangles in each group, and these, one above the other, both point toward the neck of the vase; they are not dotted. On the other hand the alternating groups of vertical lines (from three to four in number) enclose rows of sucker dots. The pattern is of cream color on a black ground. The bottom of the vase is plain red.

Akin to all the foregoing is an octopus motive produced by shifting the mouth opening from the neck of the vase to an equatorial point on the side of the body and representing it by means of a painted circle. In order to eliminate as it were the neck and aperture of the vase from consideration, a large circular panel is formed about this make-believe mouth opening as a center. The eight arms converging from the periphery of the panel toward the

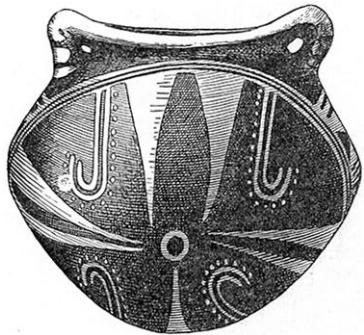


FIG. 32.—Octopus motive. The two kinds of arms converge toward the center of a circular panel. Yale collection. $1/2$ size.



FIG. 33.—From Holmes. (Sixth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, fig. 171.)

central mouth opening produce the same effect as though one were looking down on the vase in figure 29. This gives the design that in earlier publications was called the rosette. It is simply a variety of the octopus motive and is met with perhaps oftener than any other single variety. In order the more easily to arrive at a circular panel, the body of the vessel was made spherical and the neck small, two characters common to lost color vases. It is therefore probable that the exigencies of the design tended to control the shape of the vessel, and vice versa.

A good example just rescued from the duplicate material in the Yale Museum is reproduced in figure 32. In this case a certain amount of artistic license is taken. Four of the arms are frond-like and bear suckers; the alternating four are straight, tapering (the triangular type), and are not accompanied by rows of dots. Three of these are in duplicate without seriously cloaking the fact that the total number of arms is to be counted as eight.

An exceedingly ingenious and well-balanced use of the rosette type of octopus motive is given in figure 33 (Holmes' fig. 171). Here the artist succeeded in securing a complete octopus motive, no matter whether the vase was viewed from the top, bottom, or the side. In order that the rosette on the side might not overbalance the design grouped about the neck or the bottom of the vase, an equatorial horizontal band cuts each circular panel in two, thus blotting out the customary mouth opening in the center of the circular panel. Viewed from the top, therefore, one must include in the motive the upper half of each rosette and the pointed or triangular arm in duplicate occurring in each alternating space between the rosettes. This gives the same number and disposition of arm groups about the neck of the vase as in each rosette, that is to say, frond-like suckered alternating with pointed arm groups, and eight in all. It will also be seen that a like disposition of arm groups is repeated about the bottom of the vase. In speaking of the rosettes Holmes had this to say: "It is clear however that these devices showing curves, hooks, and dots are not of technical or mechanical origin, but that they refer to delineative originals of which they are survivals; but we must remain in the dark as to what the originals were or what was the precise nature of the idea associated with them in the mind of the decorator." The veil of darkness has finally been lifted. We now know that the original was one common in Isthmian waters, the octopus.

A still greater license as to the duplication of arms, keeping however the number of arm groups down to eight, is seen in figure 34. The mouth opening is spool-shaped instead of circular. The spool consists of two triangular-arm motives fused at their apexes. (In a vase belonging to the Heye Museum the margins of each

of the two fused triangles, bases excepted, are accompanied by dots.) The suckered arms have lost their frond-like character. Each of these arms is represented by three parallel lines cut at their extremities by means of a short line at right angles. The dots representing suckers are arranged along the outer margins of the



FIG. 34.—Octopus motive forming a rosette. The suckered arms have lost their frond-like character. Yale collection. $\frac{1}{2}$ size.



FIG. 35.—The octopus appendage motive used independently as a panel decoration. Yale collection. $\frac{1}{2}$ size.

outer lines. By placing the suckers within the field bounded by these lines, one arrives at the stage reproduced in figure 35, which would never be taken for an octopus motive were it not for the intervening stages. In some examples of this sort, a pair of characteristic triangular octopus appendages are placed in each of the spaces alternating with the two arched panels.

If this is the octopus motive then we must include such examples as figures 36 and 37. In figure 36 there are exactly eight conventionalized suckered appendages converging toward the neck of the vase, and four appendages of the triangular type.

Before passing from the rosette type of octopus motive in which the mouth opening is placed equatorially on the side of the vessel, attention is called to a novel grouping of the eight octopus arms, not converging toward a mouth opening in the center of a circular

panel, but grouped in original fashion about a mouth opening in the center of a four-sided panel (fig. 38). Two additional representations of the mouth opening are added beneath the two lower appendages.

As has already been said, the octopus appendage motive ap-



FIG. 36.—The octopus motive as a shoulder decoration. Yale collection. 1/2 size.

pears under two rather distinct forms: the waving type of arm composed of two or more parallel lines, and the short-based triangle. Each of these types is sometimes accompanied by a series of dots to represent suckers. In the more conventionalized examples the waving arms become straight; in these cases the dots are apt to be within the boundaries of the lines composing each arm. In figure 39, four such arms form a broken zigzag in an arched panel. Alternating with these are five arms of the triangular type. On the opposite side in a four-sided panel are also four arms in zigzag, alternating with three triangular arms; so that in the two panels there are a total of eight arms of each type.

Such examples as these are evidently the key to the meaning of the groups of straight parallel lines, unaccompanied by dots and arranged in broken zigzags which decorate arched panels on so many vases of the lost color group. Mr. George G. Heye of the Heye Museum purchased in 1915 a collection of Chiriquian antiq-

uities including a vase decorated with a happy combination of octopus motives (fig. 40). In the space left on each side between the two arched panels is a lozenge-shaped octopus body to which



FIG. 37.—Octopus appendage motives arranged in broken zigzag as a panel decoration.
Yale collection. $\frac{2}{5}$ size.

are attached four waving appendages and one triangular type of appendage, its apex in contact with the lower point of the lozenge-shaped body. This design combines every element contained in a



FIG. 38.—Eight octopus appendages grouped around a central mouth opening so as to form a novel panel decoration. Yale collection. $\frac{1}{2}$ size.

complete octopus representation with the exception of sucker dots. In the arched panels are groups of straight parallel lines also unaccompanied by dots and arranged in broken zigzag. As if to aid in



FIG. 39.—Two types of octopus appendage disposed alternately to form a panel decoration. Yale collection. $1/2$ size.

their interpretation triangles occupy the angles of the zigzag. These triangles are not dotted to be sure, but they are cross-lined in



FIG. 40.—Octopus body to which is attached four waving arms, and one of the triangular type. Octopus appendage motives fill the arched panels. Heye collection, cat. no. 41422. $1/3$ size.

a manner to suggest a dotted area. In other words the decoration in these arched panels consists of the two types of octopus appendage motive. Another example with variations is reproduced in figure 41.

A connecting link between the preceding two figures and those showing more realistic arms is reproduced (from Holmes) in figure 42. In one arched panel is a series of waving arms; in the other are plain straight arms in broken zigzag, which seem to alternate



FIG. 41.—Two types of the octopus appendage motive used as panel decorations.
Yale collection. $1/2$ size.

with arms of the triangular type. The frond-like appendage motive is repeated in the two interspaces alternating with the arched panels. In one Yale example the dotted banded appendage is repeated in a zigzag that completely encircles the shoulder zone; alternating with this are two series of triangular arm symbols (bearing dots along two sides but not along the base), one series pointing downward from the neck, and the other pointing upward from the equatorial band.

With slight variations a similar treatment of the shoulder zone is often met with.

In figure 43 the whole body of the vase is divided into four vertical panels by means of two vertical bands each composed of four parallel straight lines; one of the two bands cuts the other at the bottom of the vase. In each of the four panels thus formed is a broken zigzag composed of four octopus arms; so that in the four



FIG. 42.—From Holmes. (Sixth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, fig. 180.)

panels sixteen octopus appendages are represented. While emphasizing the fact that octopus appendage motives do very often occur in eights or in multiples and even divisors of eight, it should be distinctly borne in mind that the rule is by no means universal. The wonder nevertheless is that the artist should have so often taken the trouble to emphasize his meaning by an appeal to arithmetical proportions.

The broken zigzag may be even further disguised by filling the interspaces with series of dots or with dotted circles (fig. 44). These represent suckers and mouth openings. Alternating with

the two arched panels and reaching downward from the neck are two octopus arms of the triangular kind. The design below the equatorial band consists of eight groups of parallel lines (two or more in each group), converging toward a central point on the bottom of the vase, evidently another method of giving expression to the octopus motive. Groups of lines on the lower zone converging toward the bottom of the vase are employed extensively and exclusively in the lost color ware. All are traceable to the same original, the octopus.

We have already pointed out several examples of the triangular type of octopus appendage motive. An additional example is reproduced in figure 45. Practically the entire body of the vase is



FIG. 43.—The octopus appendage motive in the form of broken zigzags filling the four panels. Yale collection. 2/3 size.

FIG. 44.—Highly conventionalized octopus motives, in which are recognized traces of the broken zigzag. Yale collection. 1/2 size.

covered by six arched panels, three on the shoulder and three below the shoulder reaching nearly to the bottom of the vase. The triangular octopus arm is repeated three times in each of the shoulder panels, and five times in each of the lower panels, making twenty-four in the six panels. In each of the three shoulder interspaces there is one octopus arm, and one is to be found in the space left over at the bottom. Suckers are represented on the two longer sides of each triangle, a condition met with in many examples of

this motive; but the base of each triangle is free of dots (see figs. 29, 30, 31). Two of the arms in two of the lower panels are of diminutive size and twinned; two small triangles are united at their apexes forming a spool-shaped design that is used to represent the mouth opening in some of the rosette octopus motives (see fig. 34). The spool-shaped symbol that is sometimes repeated till it covers



FIG. 45.—Octopus appendages in the shape of short-based triangles. Suckers are indicated on the two longer sides of each triangle but never along the base. Heye collection. $1/2$ size.



FIG. 46.—Zonal decoration consisting of the octopus body motive enclosing sucker dots. Yale collection. $1/2$ size.

the whole body of vases is thus intimately associated with the octopus, from which it may be looked upon as a derivative.

The triangular octopus appendage is frequently repeated a dozen or more times to form a zonal or a rosette ornament. In some zonal examples the points are directed downward; in others they converge toward the neck. Good examples were published by Holmes (figs. 163, 164) and in my monograph (fig. 195). In rosettes the points converge toward the center of the circular panel, or radiate toward the perimeter as the case may be.

Referring to the key specimen published in my last note, we find the octopus body represented by a rhomboidal or lozenge-shaped figure. In some realistic examples showing appendages attached to the body, the dots representing suckers are placed within the field of the body rather than on the appendages. Remembering the freedom with which the ancient Chiriquian artist

suppressed or transposed parts, one would expect to find cases where the body is represented and the appendages omitted. This would give an octopus body motive. The body motive, as was the case with appendage motives, is repeated to form zonal or other ornaments (fig. 46). As might be expected, it is not limited to the lozenge form. Any four-sided, perhaps even rounded or triangular design would answer the symbolic requirements, especially if it contained dots to suggest suckers and, by inference, the appendages on which they grow. In one Yale vase the shoulder zone consists of a series of dotted lozenge-shaped octopus body motives, alternating with the spool-shaped symbol, which as we have already stated consists of two octopus arm motives of the triangular type fused at their apexes.

Thus practically all the puzzling designs of the lost color ware which once seemed so far removed from a zoömorphic original are traceable to the octopus. The box-shaped and kindred figures bearing waving appendages represent the octopus unit, as do also the rosettes and appendage groups surrounding the necks of vases. The body portion may be used alone and repeated as a motive independent of the appendages, especially if sucker symbols are associated with it. On the other hand the appendages are employed in like manner independent of the body, either with or without the accompaniment of dots. The appendage motive appears as varieties of two types: the short-based triangle and the banded design composed of two or more parallel lines; these lines, and hence the band itself, may be sinuous or straight.

A reëxamination of the lost color group therefore leads inevitably to the conclusion that it is dominated by the octopus even more completely than the armadillo and the alligator respectively dominate two other important Chiriquian ceramic groups. It appears unmistakably under one guise or another on perhaps nine-tenths of all the lost color vases hitherto published; a cursory study of the large duplicate series in the Yale Museum shows that at least as large a percentage holds true of unpublished specimens. If a new name were needed for the group, *octopus* ware would thus be most appropriate.

With such an exuberant proliferation of motives derived from a single zoömorphic original, there is of course ever present the possibility of the overlapping of motives that started from wholly different originals. I have already referred to the occurrence of the dorsal-view motive of the alligator on lost color ware. It is highly probable that the overlapping of this motive (perhaps also the scale-group and spine motive) and the one derived from the suckers and appendages of the octopus has taken place to some extent; due to the convergence toward a common type of scale-spine symbols of the alligator on the one hand, and appendage-sucker symbols of the octopus on the other. In so far as ancient Chiriquian art may serve as a guide, however, instead of accounting for the evolution of the various motive groups, such overlappings are rather to be considered as exceptions that prove the rule.

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